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On the right track?

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On the right track?

Specialisation in veterinary education and practice

Andrew Gardiner

‘Not only is the organisation of veterinary specialisation confusing and opaque, but the profession’s concept of specialisation is inward-looking and oriented towards fellow professionals rather than aimed at informing the customer. The customer is not even given the reassurance that someone who claims a specialism is professionally sanctioned to do so’.

The Lowe Report, *Unlocking Potential*, BVA, 2009

SPECIALISATION IN PRACTICE

Who counts as an eye specialist? You choose!



- ☐ ‘Mr A in our practice, who does most of our small animal work...’
- ☐ ‘Ms B in our practice, who has a special interest in eyes...’
- ☐ ‘Ms C in our practice, who has the RCVS Ophthalmology Certificate...’
- ☐ ‘Mr D, who has the RCVS Ophthalmology Certificate and has an excellent reputation for taking local referrals...’
- ☐ ‘Ms E, who has a European Diploma in Ophthalmology and works at a multi-disciplinary referral centre...’
- ☐ ‘Dr F, who has an RCVS Diploma in Ophthalmology, a PhD and works as an academic clinician...’



How veterinary specialisation has developed

The medical model – ‘formal’ specialism

- Specialist training involves exams and memberships
- Disciplines created by developing new clinical areas or removing them from remit of general practice
- Expertise is divided and formal referral structures developed
- GPs (as in Medicine) may be prevented from treating certain conditions or accessing certain drugs (not currently enforced in veterinary medicine)
- Produces a ‘top-down approach’ which gives clinical specialists an elite status within the profession and education
- Has been prominent in small animal medicine & surgery

The practice model – ‘experiential’ specialism

- Arises within general practice as ‘veterinary societies’ (see above)
- Often mediated by species-based interest groups operating outwith academia
- Focusses on experiential learning and informal structures/networks of expertise, which are based on peer recognition, not necessarily qualifications
- Historically, the veterinary profession has resisted formal division of expertise
- Has been prominent in farm animal practice

Some educational issues

- Does the **medical model** of specialisation fit veterinary medicine?
- Who **enforces** specialisation, where, and how?
- Can a **small profession** sustain a **high degree of specialisation**?
- Should specialisation in the form of ‘**tracking**’ be introduced into undergraduate training?
- We cannot consider **postgraduate specialisation** without also considering **undergraduate ‘specialisation’**

Reference

Gardiner, A., Lowe, P. & Armstrong, J. ‘Who or what is a veterinary specialist?’ *Veterinary Record* 2011; 169: 354-356